

But for the Turn of a Screw

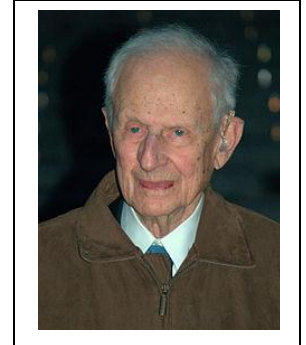


Sotomayor might have never been appointed to the Supreme Court

By Robert Porter Lynch Brown '69 February 2018

Sotomayor's Mentor, Robert Morgenthau, barely Survived WWII

On Tuesday, June 2, 2009 I was sitting in the office of the legendary New York City District Attorney, [Robert M. Morgenthau](#). He was 90 years old, had fought crime in the Big Apple since 1975, and was destined to retire at the end of the year as New York State's oldest DA. Morgenthau's exploits were iconic fighting the mob; he was the original role model for the DA in the popular *Law and Order* TV series.



I was presenting him with a painting the [U.S.S. Harry F. Bauer](#) created by my father, Robert B. Lynch (Brown '44), who was a quite good amateur artist. Upon graduating from Brown, he served as a junior officer aboard the *Bauer*; Robert Morgenthau was his Executive Officer.

Unexpectedly, it was a very busy day. Over the weekend President Obama had announced the nomination of the nation's first Hispanic woman for Supreme Court Justice.

Reporters were streaming into Morgenthau's office for interviews about Sonia Sotomayor, who he mentored in her early career while she served as Morgenthau's Assistant District Attorney.

Morgenthau's staff in the late 1970s was overloaded with a massive build-up of cases. He needed fresh blood, and especially someone from the Hispanic community. Before graduating from Yale Law School in 1979, Sotomayor stepped into the breach during an era when the City was plagued with crisis-level crime rates .

As a rookie prosecutor, Sotomayor threw herself into the job, chipping away at the heavy caseload burden that included shoplifting, prostitution, robberies, and murders. Her courage and adeptness in tough neighborhoods interviewing witnesses built trust with the community. She was also masterful in the courtroom, simplifying issues to enable juries in making incisive decisions. Working overtime, she earned the reputation of a strong work ethic coupled with courageousness, preparedness, and fairness.

During an interlude between reporter's questions, I quipped, "But for the turn of a screw, Sonia might never have become a Supreme Court nominee."

Morgenthau raised an eyebrow.

I responded, "If that Japanese kamikaze bomb's fuse had set, neither you nor I would be here today."

The twinkle in his keen eye indicated concurrence.



Japanese "Judy" Dive Bomber hit by Anti-Aircraft shells

My Father is Assigned to Morgenthau's ship

As an R.O.T.C. graduate of Brown in 1944, my father was commissioned as a naval officer and assigned to the *U.S.S. Harry F. Bauer*, a destroyer built in Bath, Maine. His Executive Officer (2nd in command) was Robert W. Morgenthau, the son of President Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau.

The "Exec" was already a war hero. His ship, the [U.S. S. Landsdale](#), escorting a convoy into the Mediterranean in April 1944 was attacked by waves of German torpedo bombers. The ship suffered a multitude of hits and rapidly took on water. All hands abandoned ship as the *Lansdale* quickly broke up and sank. 234 men, including Morgenthau, survived (47 went down to their deaths).

Morgenthau was quickly reassigned that year to the *Bauer*, where my father served as Combat Information Officer. After their shakedown cruise, the *Bauer* passed through the Panama Canal to join the Pacific Fleet.

As my father recounted years later, these were dangerous waters without Japanese adversaries. In mid-December of 1944, Typhoon Cobra swamped the Pacific Fleet off the Philippines; its deadly goliath winds and waves tossed ships like they were mere rowboats. He sadly recounted losing fellow



Harry F. Bauer DD-738/DM-26

officers he personally admired as the storm engulfed three destroyers just like the *Bauer*; the deadly devil-wind sent all hands to their graves, totally 775 officers and enlisted men, dead or washed overboard from the three ships alone. Admiral Halsey, in his autobiography, described the power of the typhoon:

"No one who has not been through a typhoon can conceive its fury. The 70 foot seas smash you. The rain blinds you. The battleship *New Jersey* once was hit by a 5-inch shell and I did not even feel the impact. The [battleship] *Missouri* had kamikaze crash on her main deck and we repaired the only damage with a paint brush. But the typhoon tossed our enormous ship the *Missouri* as if she were only a canoe."

The *Bauer* departed Pearl Harbor (27 January '45) for the invasion Iwo Jima, the next stop in the island hopping campaign to end the Japanese terror. As the heroic invasion troops stormed ashore (19 February '45), the *Bauer* acted as a picket vessel and carried out antisubmarine patrol to protect the -transports. She then conducted shore bombardment, destroying several gun emplacements, tanks, and supply dumps.

The Battle of Okinawa

In late March, '45 the *Bauer* was the first naval vessel to arrive in the waters off the coast of Okinawa in advance of the massive invasion, which would be the largest amphibious assault of the Pacific war. The battle waged on for over two months. Morgenthau, my father, and the crew of the *Bauer* were attacked by waves of Japanese aircraft and a pack of Japanese submarines, as the Japanese resorted to desperate, but futile, efforts to stop the invasion with kamikaze suicide tactics.

Soon after arrival, (25 March '45) a wave of Japanese aircraft pounded the ship. The heroic ship survived, shooting down three planes (29 March '45).

A week later a torpedo bomber's "fish" crashed through the bow, and blew right through the other side. Fortunately, the warhead's fuse failed to detonate. (Destroyers are nicknamed "tin cans" because of their thin skins) (6 April '45).

Two weeks passed when (20 April '45) the ship was attacked again by another squadron of Japanese planes. The Bauer splashed three more aircraft, while assisting in downing two others. Another week later (27 April '45) the crew warded off another series of aerial attacks, shooting down one more plane.

Soon after (11 May '45), a further wave of kamikaze suicide planes attacked the *Bauer*. In a suicide dive, a kamikaze pilot succumbed to intense fire, glancing off the stern boat deck, slicing through a row of high explosive depth charges on the fantail, casting them into the sea. By another miracle, none exploded. Two more enemy aircraft were shot down that day. A pack of submarines began their assault, resulting in the *Bauer's* assist in the destruction of one of the subs. (27 May '45)

As June came, the fleet was in high alert for Typhoon Connie bound for Okinawa (5 June '45). Fortunately for the *Bauer* and her squadron, the typhoon veered away, instead blasting Halsey's Third Fleet with sixty foot seas and 150 knot winds. This was just the calm before the real storm.

The next day the Japanese kamikaze counter-attack intensified. A large squadron of enemy planes filled the anti-aircraft flak-laden sky. Pummeled and bruised, the *Bauer* gallantly fought back, knocking three more suicide planes out of the air. One of the suicide dive bombers glanced off the ship's superstructure. The ship was pretty beaten up, with a multitude of bullet and shrapnel holes, but still afloat and fully operational.

Apparently, during the battle one of the ship's below-waterline fuel tanks, located amidships, ruptured. The crew believed they must have been hit by shrapnel. Two compartments were flooded. Unbeknownst to the officers and their shipmates, the last dive bomber had penetrated with an unexploded bomb in the fuel tank.

For the Bauer's gallant action, she received a [Presidential Citation](#):

"for extraordinary heroism in action" to maintain a "seaworthy, fighting ship, complemented by skilled and courageous officers and men... achieving a notable record of gallantry in combat, attesting to the teamwork of her entire company and enhancing the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

But for the Turn of a Screw

The following week the *Bauer* escorted her destroyer sister-ship, the [J. William Ditter](#), back to safety in the nearby Kerama Retto islands (about 20 miles south west of Okinawa). The *Ditter* had also been pounded in the same final air attack. Her gun crews downed five planes. One of the suicide planes knocked off her No. 2 stack and another crashed into her port side near the main deck. Despite suffering extensive damage and many casualties, valiant efforts kept her afloat.

Once in Kerama Retto the *Bauer* had her damage surveyed. An Associated Press article in the *Providence Journal*, saved in my mother's scrapbook describes the event:

Ship Held Unexploded Bomb 17 Days after Battle

The destroyer minelayer *Harry F. Bauer*, which shot down 13 Kamikaze planes in action off Okinawa, learned that for 17 days since the battle they had been literally walking with death underfoot.

Lt.(jg) Robert B. Lynch, (Combat Information Officer) 5 Legion Way, Cranston, will remember for the rest of his days that three threads on a bomb fuse probably was all that prevented him from becoming a name on the Navy Department casualty lists.

Bomb in Fuel Tank

Unnoticed during the heat of battle, a 550-pound aerial bomb from a kamikaze hit the ship. The kamikaze released the bomb just moments before crashing into the ship amidships with a glancing blow. The bomb pierced the hull and fell into a fuel tank without exploding.

The unexploded bomb was discovered when the flooded fuel tanks of the destroyer were emptied. The hole in the tank had been believed caused by shrapnel.

During the battle, the destroyer was also pierced by an aerial torpedo, which entered the port bow and passed through the starboard bow, also without exploding. The “tail” of the “fish” was left hanging inside the ship, and discovered when the ship was surveyed for repairs.

3 Threads from Death

No one with sufficient experience in defusing bombs was aboard the destroyer, and a hurry call was sent for Lt. Charles M. Rupprecht of Englewood, N.J., air ordnance officer aboard one of Halsey’s Third Fleet carriers.

The Lieutenant, who is over six feet tall, removed the bomb on June 30th. He worked alone for four hours in the bottom of the tank, removing the tail and nose fuses of the bomb and fitting a hoist to it so it could be lifted from the ship.

Later examination of the fuses belied the ordnance officer’s statement that his job was “just routine.” It was found that three threads in each fuse were all that prevented the firing pins from dropping on the charges. Apparently the kamikaze pilot released the bomb just a moment too late to arm the bomb. Had the arming propeller turned another second, the bomb would have become armed, dropping the firing pins on the charges. Had the pins dropped, the bomb would have exploded and probably caused the loss of the destroyer and all its crew, other ordnance officers said. -30 –

But for the turn of three threads of a screw, the world would have been a different place.

Robert Morgenthau would not have been New York’s DA.

Sonia Sotomayor might not have been thrust into prominence.

And I would not have written this story.

The odds of a Japanese Kamikaze pilot hitting his target was one-in-three. Dozens of Kamikazes attacked the *Harry F. Bauer’s* squadron. Over thirteen were shot down (and three more ‘probable’) by Morgenthau’s ship.

Was the *Harry F. Bauer* the luckiest ship in the Navy? Or was it Divine Intervention?

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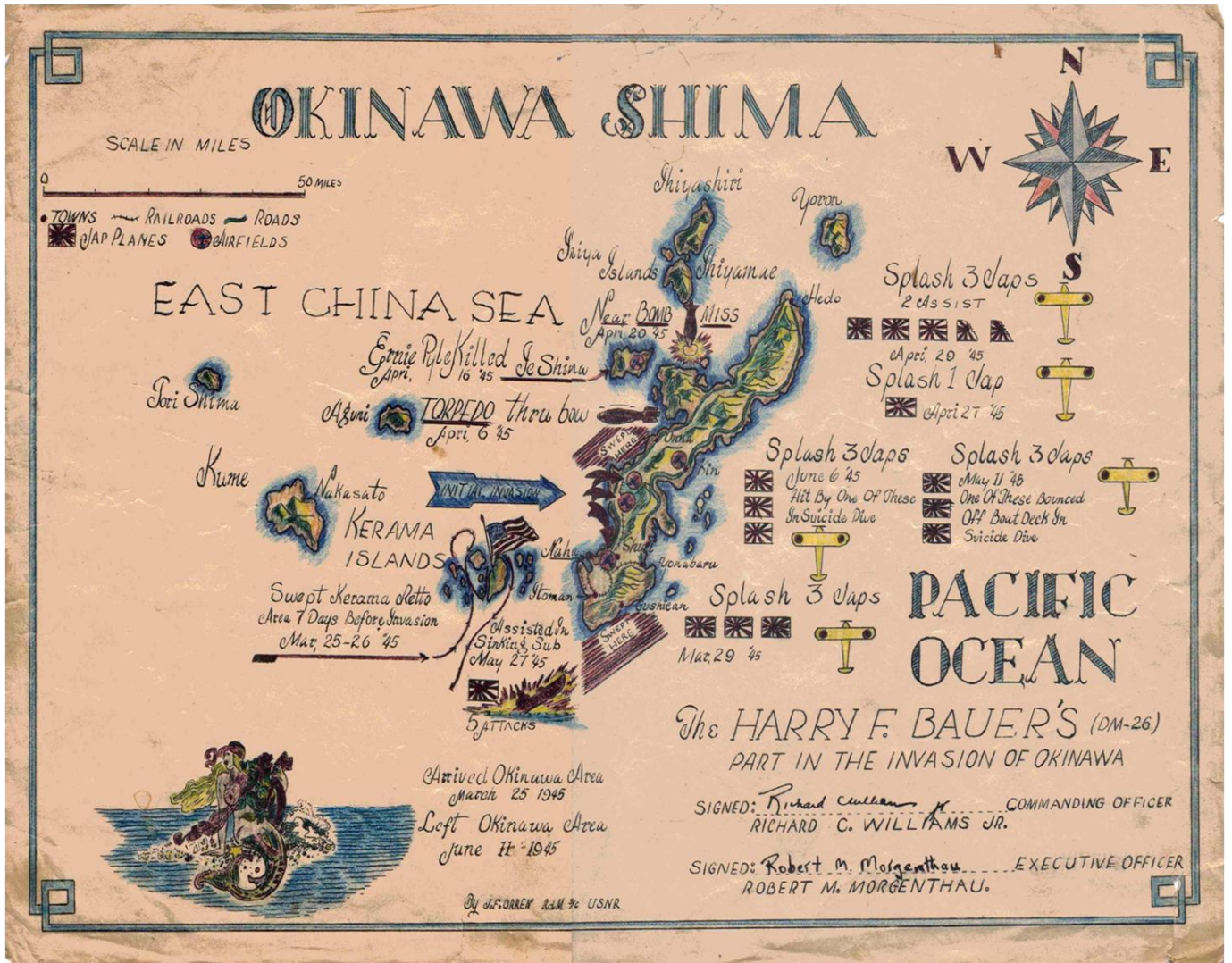


Figure 1: Harry F. Bauer's role in the Battle of Okinawa with detail of each attack